

**Statement of Congressman Ron Kind
H.Con.Res. 22
Honoring Czech President Vaclav Havel
February 11, 2003**

MR. SPEAKER, I AM PLEASED HAVE AUTHORED THIS RESOLUTION HONORING ONE OF THE MOST PROMINENT WORLD LEADERS FOR DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS, VACLAV HAVEL. I WANT TO THANK THE GENTLEMAN FROM ILLINOIS, CHAIRMAN HYDE, AND THE GENTLEMAN FROM CALIFORNIA, MR. LANTOS, FOR BRINGING THIS RESOLUTION TO THE FLOOR TODAY

ON SUNDAY FEBRUARY 2ND, VACLAV HAVEL STEPPED DOWN AS PRESIDENT OF THE CZECH REPUBLIC AFTER SERVING IN THAT CAPACITY FOR 10 YEARS. AS LEADER OF THE CZECH REPUBLIC, HAVEL SPEARHEADED THE NATION'S DEMOCRATIC EVOLUTION FOLLOWING THE FALL OF THE COMMUNIST REGIME. VACLAV HAVEL HAS BEEN INSTRUMENTAL IN THE SUCCESS OF DEMOCRACY IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC, AND IT IS PROPER THAT WE HONOR HIM TODAY.

BORN IN PRAGUE IN 1936, HAVEL COMPLETED MANDATORY SCHOOLING BY 1951, BUT DUE TO HIS PARENTS' PROMINENT STATURE, HE WAS DENIED ENTRANCE INTO THE UNIVERSITY.

OVER THE NEXT FEW YEARS, HE WORKED AS A LABORATORY TECHNICIAN AND SERVED IN THE MILITARY. DURING THIS TIME, HOWEVER, HE WAS ALSO ESTABLISHING HIMSELF AS AN ESSAYIST AND PLAYWRIGHT.

THE PRAGUE SPRING MOVEMENT OF 1968 ADVOCATED LIBERALIZING THE CZECH COMMUNIST SYSTEM, AND EMBRACED THE WORKS OF VACLAV HAVEL HIGHLIGHTING DEMOCRATIC PRINCIPLES AND HUMAN RIGHTS. THIS MOVEMENT GAINED GROUND WITHIN THE CZECH GOVERNMENT, BUT WAS SUPPRESSED BY THE SOVIET INVASION OF CZECHOSLOVAKIA LATER IN 1968. THE SEVERITY OF THE INVASION QUELLED MUCH OF THE PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR POLITICAL REFORM, AND LED TO AN ATMOSPHERE OF FEAR AND DOMINATION.

VACLAV HAVEL NEVER ABANDONED HIS CONVICTIONS AND, WHILE HIS WORKS WERE BANNED BY THE GOVERNMENT, CONTINUED TO WRITE IN SUPPORT OF DEMOCRACY. IN 1977, HAVEL HELPED FOUND CHARTER 77, THE MORAL BLUEPRINT FOR CHANGE IN CZECHOSLOVAKIA. OVER THE NEXT DECADE HE WAS ARRESTED THREE TIMES AND SPENT A TOTAL OF NEARLY FIVE YEARS IN PRISON AS A POLITICAL DISSIDENT.

DURING ONE OF HIS STAYS IN PRISON, HE BECAME DEATHLY ILL. THE COMMUNIST AUTHORITIES, AFRAID THEY WERE GOING TO HAVE A MARTYR ON THEIR HANDS, WENT TO HIM AND TOLD HIM THAT THE PEOPLE IN NEW YORK WHO GIVE OUT THE OBEY AWARDS WERE WILLING TO HOST HIM SO HE COULD DIRECT HIS OWN PLAY ON BROADWAY AS WELL AS RECEIVE PROPER MEDICAL ATTENTION AND CARE. HE ASKED THEM ONE QUESTION: IF HE WENT, WOULD HE BE ALLOWED TO RETURN TO CZECHOSLOVAKIA? THEY COULD NOT GIVE THAT ASSURANCE. SO HE SAID, "I WILL STAY" INSTEAD.

IN THE 1980'S VACLAV HAVEL HELPED FORM CIVIC FORUM, THE POLITICAL ALTERNATIVE TO THE COMMUNIST REGIME. HAVEL BECAME THE UNOFFICIAL LEADER OF THIS MOVEMENT CULMINATING IN THE VELVET REVOLUTION AND THE FALL OF COMMUNISM IN CZECHOSLOVAKIA IN 1989.

AS A THIRD YEAR LAW STUDENT, I HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO GO TO CENTRAL EUROPE A FEW MONTHS AFTER THE REVOLUTIONS. I LIVED OUT OF A BACKPACK AND TRAVELED THROUGHOUT THE CAPITALS OF CENTRAL EUROPE TO SEE THESE CHANGES FIRST HAND. WHILE TRAVELING IN CZECHOSLOVAKIA, I MET SOME OF THE HEROES OF THE REVOLUTION LED BY HAVEL AND OTHERS - PEOPLE WHO BOLSTERED MY HOPE IN THE INSTITUTIONS OF DEMOCRACY.

MANY WERE STUDENTS ABOUT MY AGE WHO WERE ON THE FRONT LINES OF THE DEMONSTRATIONS, LITERALLY STARING DOWN THE BARREL OF GUNS AND SOVIET-MADE TANKS, NOT KNOWING IF THEY WERE GOING TO SUCCEED OR SUFFER ANOTHER PRAGUE SPRING LIKE IN 1968. THEY DID NOT HAVE WEAPONS TO FIGHT BACK WITH, ONLY THEIR COURAGE. THEY KNEW THEY WERE RISKING IT ALL, BUT THEY CHOSE TO DO SO FOR THE SAKE OF THEIR OWN FUTURE. AND THEY PREVAILED.

IT IS A MAGNIFICENT IRONY OF HISTORY TODAY THAT ONE OF THE MOST OPPRESSIVE COMMUNIST REGIMES THROUGHOUT CENTRAL EUROPE, CZECHOSLOVAKIA, WOULD LATER BE LED BY A FORMER POET AND PLAYWRIGHT. FOLLOWING THE REVOLUTION, VACLAV HAVEL BECAME THE FIRST DEMOCRATICALLY ELECTED LEADER OF CZECHOSLOVAKIA SINCE TOMAS MASARYK AND EDUARD BENES BEFORE THE SECOND WORLD WAR. AFTER THE PEACEFUL SPLIT OF CZECHOSLOVAKIA IN 1993, HAVEL WAS ELECTED PRESIDENT OF THE CZECH REPUBLIC.

UNDER THE LEADERSHIP OF VACLAV HAVEL, THE CZECH REPUBLIC HAS BECOME ONE OF THE MOST SUCCESSFUL ECONOMIES IN THE FORMER SOVIET BLOC, A MEMBER OF NATO, AND A PROSPECTIVE MEMBER OF THE EUROPEAN UNION. IN ADDITION, THE REPUBLIC HAS BEEN KEY ALLY OF THE UNITED STATES IN THE GLOBAL WAR AGAINST TERRORISM.

VACLAV HAVEL REMAINS ONE OF THE MOST RESPECTED LEADERS AROUND THE WORLD. HE PERSONIFIES THE SUCCESSFUL STRUGGLE OF PEOPLE STRIVING FOR FREEDOM AGAINST OPPRESSIVE RULERS, AND IS THE RECIPIENT OF MANY PRESTIGIOUS INTERNATIONAL AWARDS AND HONORARY DOCTORATES FOR HIS LITERARY WORKS AND LIFE-LONG COMMITMENT TO PEACE AND INDIVIDUAL LIBERTY. TODAY CONGRESS EXPRESSES ITS GRATITUDE FOR HIS SERVICE TO THE PEOPLE OF THE CZECH REPUBLIC AND TO THE CAUSE OF HUMAN RIGHTS AND DEMOCRACY AROUND THE GLOBE. WE WISH HIM SUCCESS IN HIS RETIREMENT FROM PUBLIC LIFE.